

California's veterans at a crossroads

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With huge budget deficits and insufficient revenue, California stands at a crucial fiscal crossroads. As an opening salvo to the budget wars, the governor has proposed a 10 percent cut across the breadth of the California budget, including the services that most directly affect the quality of our lives: education, health care, the environment.

Although this may seem extreme it provides an opportunity to seek efficiencies, examine our priorities and frame long-term solutions. One of our highest priorities, and a key element to any solution, must be our commitment to invest in education and job training for all Californians, and that includes our young men and women returning to civilian life from the armed forces.

A robust work force is the revenue-generating engine that can power our way to a better future, and I believe that educated and trained veterans are an essential component of our efforts to energize California's economy. That is why I support the governor's "Troops to College" initiative, a program that is being initiated throughout the University of California, California State University and community college systems to facilitate the integration of veterans into our work force.

It is a terrific program, but we cannot do it alone, we need the support of the federal government that sent our veterans to war. We need the funds that a new, more generous G.I. Bill would provide to fuel the revenue engine.

Near the close of the Second World War, a grateful nation rewarded the sacrifice of her veterans with the most comprehensive benefits package ever conceived: the Servicemembers' Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill. Not only did it provide full tuition and expenses to any university or college, including the Ivy League, it provided a generous living allowance.

By the time it expired in 1956, more than 7.8 million veterans had benefited from either a comprehensive education or training program, and nearly 2.6 million received VA-backed home loans. It was the investment that contributed significantly to the post-war economic boom and helped establish our nation's once vibrant middle class.

Imagine the positive impact that thousands of trained and educated Californians entering our work force can have on California's fiscal future. This commitment to education and vocational training for all Californians is the real long-term solution to California's fiscal problems and must include our veterans.

There is no better investment in our future. It prepares Californians for good paying jobs and pays off in increased revenues that can then be reinvested to improve the lives of all Californians as well as expand our education and vocational training system.

Californians have made the most significant contribution to support both Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, both in numbers and in casualties. The federal government has taken our citizens and used them, and it now time for our president and Congress to step up and honor California's response to our nation's call.

Right now, our elected federal representatives are introducing bipartisan legislation to overhaul and expand the benefits available to our men and women in the armed forces. Characterized as a G.I. Bill for the 21st century, it would not match the generosity provided to the veterans of the Second World War, but would dramatically increase funding for educational benefits, including specialized trade and technical training and veterans' housing and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Like its generous predecessor, the newly proposed G.I. Bill may face opposition and debate. However, I am convinced that if properly motivated, as they were in 1944, members of Congress will set aside their differences and do what needs to be done. However, it is our duty as citizens, as well as the members of our state Legislature, county and city governments, to make ourselves heard.

We need to urge our federal and state governments to support our veterans, whether it is to enact the G.I. Bill for the 21st century, or to adequately fund our state Department of Veterans Affairs. We need to reach out to our elected officials and let them know that we care about California's, and our nation's, veterans. We need to do the right thing